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History of the English Language
Independent project

Changing Thoughts, Changing Words

I.

For my independent project, I decided to study the language used to discuss the honor system at Sweet Briar College in student handbooks from 1917 to 2002, and to analyze the differences in the handbooks, considering both changes in the language itself, and changes in the approach to the honor system. To do this, I examine the section discussing the honor system in handbooks every seven years, beginning with 1917, looking at tone, diction, and the changing components of the honor system itself, as these affect the language used to describe them. Finally, I briefly discuss what these aspects of language imply for the attitudes towards Sweet Briar's honor system in different periods.

II.

1917-1918

The tone of the passage is very informal, and uses both the first person plural and the second person singular. The diction is casual, in sharp contrast to the very legal terminology used in later handbooks. The passage is very short and gives no description of any procedure of the honor council, which itself is very small. It also includes no honor pledge, explaining that none is needed because "...the fact of your being a student at Sweet Briar and therefore a lady serves as a pledge that your work is your own" (Student Handbook 1917 19). The effect is to seem as if a group of older students were chattily explaining the honor system to a first-year student, even going so far as to warn

her that honor is taken far more seriously at Sweet Briar than at preparatory school (Student Handbook 1917 20).

1925-1926

The 1925 description of the honor system is far more formal than the 1917 version, using only the third person. The diction is very precise. The following passage is an example of the sort of language employed: “occasional and accidental neglect of the rules governing quiet and lights...” (Student Handbook 1925 35). Clearly, there is no remnant of the casual, friendly attitude of the earlier description. This passage is both longer and more thorough than the 1917 passage, but is not as long as more recent examples. It describes the system of reporting oneself or another person, and a written pledge is required of students.

1932-1933

The tone of the 1932 passage, interestingly, does not follow the trend of the 1925. It is not nearly as casual as the 1917, using only the third person, but is a more general description than the 1925. There is no discussion of procedure, and emphasis is placed on the importance of honor in “every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1932 35).

1939-1940

The 1939 description of the honor system is almost identical to the 1932. The primary difference is in sentence structure. Where the 1932 handbook says: “The Executive Committee of the Association has the power to investigate and take action in

any case involving an infraction of the Honor System and in performing this function needs the support of every student”(Student Handbook 1932 35), the 1939 breaks this into two separate sentences: “The Executive Committee of the Association has the power to investigate and take action in any case involving an infraction of the Honor System. In performing this function it needs the support of every student” (Student Handbook 1939 21). The only differences between the passages are the break and the necessary addition of a subject for the second sentence in the 1939 version. The same thing happens in the next sentence. The 1932 version states: “The Honor System applies not only to examinations but to all class work during the year and also to every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1932 35). The 1939 states: “The Honor System applies to every phase of college life. This includes not only examinations but all class and daily work” (Student Handbook 1939 21). With the breaking of this sentence, the last clause of the original sentence became the first of the two new sentences.

Although the actual words change very little, the shift in implied values is a great one; the new first sentence not only comes before the original first clause, but it begins a new paragraph, so that the idea has gone from being a peripheral one tacked onto the end of a sentence to the focus of the entire paragraph. The original first clause now only serves to explain the new first sentence. The effect that these structural changes have on the tone of the 1939 passage is to make it seem choppy and more legalistic; it is not discussing aspects of the honor system as much as it is listing them.

The final difference between the two versions is one of diction. The 1932 passage states that, “A Sweet Briar girl’s work is her bond” (Student Handbook 1932 25), while in the 1939, “A Sweet Briar girl’s word is her bond...” (Student Handbook 1939 21).

What has changed here is the idea of honor, and how intrinsic it is to a community of women in the early twentieth century. The 1932 version is reminiscent of the 1917 idea that simply being a Sweet Briar student was enough of a pledge (Student Handbook 1917 20). It is the doing of the work that pledges in 1932, whereas in 1939 a more formal idea of a student's word, separate from one's work, is required.

1946-1947

The 1946 description of the honor system is identical to the 1939 in every way except in the beginning of the second paragraph. In 1939 it read: "The Honor System applies to every phase of college life. This includes not only examinations but all class and daily work" (Student Handbook 1939 21), but by 1946 this has been shortened simply to, "The Honor System applies to every phase of College Life" (Student Handbook 1946 13). The clause that in 1932 was the primary one of a single sentence was made merely a descriptive second sentence by 1939, and by 1946 has been removed entirely. However, in the 1946 version, the entire sentence is capitalized and in bold print (Student Handbook 1946 13). It appears that without the second explanatory sentence, there is doubt as to whether the first one might carry enough weight without additional attention being drawn to it.

1953-1954

The 1953 section of the handbook addressing the honor system differs drastically from all earlier descriptions. It is a much lengthier description, and it goes into great detail about the ideology behind the honor system, and the responsibility that comes with

freedom. The diction is formal, but not legalistic. Because the passage breaks the honor system down so thoroughly, the resulting tone is a less friendly version of the 1917 tone. This explanation is far more detailed than earlier ones, but it retains many earlier phrases and sentences. In fact, the entire 1946 description is contained within the 1953 one, although it is broken up and dispersed throughout the longer newer one.

The phrase, “the Honor System applies to every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1953 14), is, just as in the 1946, capitalized and in bold print, but in this case this is because it has changed from being the beginning of the second paragraph of the description to the title of the second section of the description. This shows that the same ideas and basic structure are intact, but have been expanded and explained. One of the most important results of this new descriptive style is that, in using lists to explain aspects of an idea, a rather legal appearance has been introduced.

1960-1961

Like the 1953 description of the honor system, the description in the 1960 handbook emphasizes freedom and responsibility. This is the first handbook to have a description of the honor system with a decidedly legal tone. It is structurally similar to the earlier description, and uses many of the same phrases, but omits much introductory material, and carries the trend of explanation seen in the 1953 version so far that it has a formal, legal tone that the 1953 did not. For example, the section entitled “the Honor System applies to every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1960 35) takes the idea of the second, explanatory sentence from the 1939 handbook, but lists the categories of student life to which it applies, and then describes in detail how it does so.

The version of the honor pledge given in the 1960 handbook is similar to the 1953 in much the same way that the 1939 description was similar to the 1932. The same words are used, but sentences have been broken, to the effect that the 1960 pledge seems more legalistic. The 1953 honor pledge states:

I pledge upon my honor to assume individual responsibility for the honor system of Sweet Briar. This individual responsibility not only includes exerting myself to the utmost to make the highest ideal of honor prevail at Sweet Briar; but this responsibility also includes reporting myself for any of my infractions of the Sweet Briar regulations; and asking others to report themselves for any of their infractions if I am not certain that they have done so (Student Handbook 1953 14).

The 1960 pledge states:

I pledge upon my honor to assume individual responsibility for the Honor System of Sweet Briar. In accepting this responsibility, I will uphold the highest ideal of honor. I promise to report myself for any infraction of the regulations and to ask others to report themselves for any of their infractions if I am not certain that they have done so (Student Handbook 1960 33).

The earlier version, by using more emphatic wording in the second sentence, emphasizes slightly more the idea of upholding the ideal of honor, whereas the later one, continuing with the legalizing trend of the rest of the 1960 description, concerns only what the student will do, without dwelling overmuch on the ideal of honor.

1967-1968

The 1967 Student Handbook passage concerning the honor system primarily discusses community and the idea of responsibility that comes with freedom that was seen in earlier handbooks. Almost no phrases from earlier handbooks are preserved, and both the phrase “the Honor System applies to every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1960 35) and the section for which it was the title do not appear in this handbook.

The diction of the passage is precise, and somewhat more formal than in earlier handbooks. An example from the opening paragraph states that, “Each student at Sweet Briar is thus required, under pledge, to govern her behavior according to the standards and principles set forth under the Honor System”(Student Handbook 1967 31). Despite sentences like this, the overall tone is not any more legal than the 1960 handbook, and perhaps is even less so. However, this is due to the change in content, rather than to any stylistic relaxation.

The pledge found in the 1967 Student Handbook is entirely different from the 1960 pledge. It reads:

I pledge that I will guarantee the validity of my word, maintain absolute honesty in my work, and respect the property of others. Realizing that these standards are an integral part of life at Sweet Briar, I hereby assume my obligation to uphold them and to abide by the regulations of the college. I will report myself and ask others to report themselves for any infraction of this pledge (Student Handbook 1967 31).

Interestingly, this wording of this pledge, particularly the phrase “I hereby assume my obligation...” (Student Handbook 1967 31) implies that a reading of it would be a performative utterance, so that signing this pledge would itself be more binding than simply understanding one’s obligation to uphold the principle of honor, as in earlier handbooks that either did not require a pledge, like the 1917, or simply focused more on ideals, like the 1953.

1974-1975

Not quite as community-oriented as the 1967, the 1974 description of the honor system is much briefer than the 1967. However, there is sufficient emphasis on community to warrant the use of the first person plural in the following phrase which

introduces three principles of honor: “The Honor System at Sweet Briar College is constructed so as to uphold these three principles which we believe to be the core of individual and community honor...” (Student Handbook 1974 24). “We” has no clear antecedent, except the community which had been discussed before this section of the passage.

The diction is no more formal than in earlier descriptions, but the grammatical constructions are. An example of this is the increased use of the passive, as in “it is believed that she will recognize the rights of others...” (Student Handbook 1974 24). The result of this increased grammatical formality is that the tone of the passage seems more legal.

The principle described by the earlier phrase “the Honor System applies to every phase of college life” (Student Handbook 1960 35), which had disappeared from the 1967 handbook, reappears here in a similar phrase: “The Honor System, a workable system of mutual trust which has been incorporated into all aspects of life at Sweet Briar...” (Student Handbook 1974 24). The exchange of “phase” for “aspects” is an interesting one. “Phase” has come to be loaded with temporal connotations, and this change may reflect that shift.

The pledge itself differs from the 1967 pledge only in that the phrase “and to abide by the regulations of the college” (Student Handbook 1967 31) has been removed from it. The idea of performative utterance or signing that appeared in the 1967 handbook is reinforced in the 1974, which says that, “each time a Sweet Briar student signs her name to anything, she acknowledges her promise to uphold the honor pledge” (Student

Handbook 1974 24). It seems that the original performative binding is repeated with every signature.

The years 1981-1982, 1988-1989 and 1995-1996 all use the 1974-1975 description of the honor code verbatim. The only changes are in 1988, when the honor pledge was changed to say, “the validity of my work” (Student Handbook 1988 7) rather than “the validity of my word” (Student Handbook 1974 24), which appeared in all the other handbooks that used this same description. This, like the 1932 description, seems to be looking back to the 1917 idea of the state of being a student, which of course involves academic work, being intrinsic to the concept of honor in the Sweet Briar community.

2002-2003

The section of the 2002 student handbook describing the honor system departs radically from the precedent set by the 1974 version, which was in use for over twenty years. It uses far more legal terminology, and explains in detail the procedures of the judicial committee and the codes of academic and non-academic conduct. The structure of the honor system has changed: it has separated the “all aspects” (Student Handbook 1960 35) or “every phase” (Student Handbook 1974 24) of college life into non-academic and academic potential violations of the honor code. This new, far more legal system is the reason for the extremely formal diction and sentence structure. The tone of the description is very formal, and the first person plural is entirely absent. In places where it might have been used is the phrase “Sweet Briar Women” (Student Handbook 2002 35).

The pledge itself has also changed. It now reads: Sweet Briar Women do not lie, cheat, steal, or violate the rights of others. Therefore, I pledge to uphold all standards of honorable conduct. I will report myself and others for any infraction of this pledge (Student Handbook 2002 34). This is shorter and more straightforward than the 1974 version, although it still retains a sense of performative utterance.

III.

A few things are apparent from these passages. The first is that the overall trend of the language used to describe the honor system went from being very informal to being very formal. This reflects the changes in the honor system itself; as it became more formal, even legal, so did the language that described it. Retaining words and phrases from earlier descriptions sometimes serves to add to the formality of the tone.

The second apparent theme is one caused by increasing emphasis on the honor pledge; as the action of pledging gained importance, the language employed in the passages became less discussion-oriented as sentences were broken up, and instead became more focused on listing required or forbidden actions of students, reflecting the performative nature of the more recent pledges.

The most important observation, which is demonstrated by the first two themes, is that language itself changed some, but very little. Rather, changes in language usage reflect changes in approach to subject matter, so that as the community's ideas about the place and purpose of honor changed, so did the language used to describe it.

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